33.

"Just Ourselves"

A top ranking TPLF official, talking to an Eritrean acquaintance recently:

"I don't understand you Eritreans. You must not be smart?'

"Why do you say that?"

" You are wasting your youth on the war. In our case we don't have to sacrifice much."

"How come?"

"We have our *Gallas,*[sic]: Plenty of them. Who do you have?"

"I guess just ourselves. Just ourselves."

The TPLF official, a spiritual heir to King Yohannes and Ras Alula, has learned his history very well. It was very common for Abyssinian rulers in the nineteenth century to use Oromos and other non-Abyssinian Ethiopians, as cannon fodder. The Tigrean rulers were particularly adept at using Oromo slaves in their periodic campaign to subdue Mereb-Milash. As Jordan Ghebremedhin has pointed out, the TPLF's use of Oromo peasants against Eritrea is a direct copy of King Yohannes' and Ras Alula's use of Oromo slaves against Mereb-Milash. We are, in a sense, watching history repeat itself. Yet in ways that today's Abyssinia's rulers did not expect. Eritrea continues its uninterrupted role, as the graveyard of Abyssinian would be conquerors.

About a week ago Prime Minister Meles informed the diplomatic corps in Addis Ababa that Ethiopia would end the war quickly. And he told a visiting delegation of the UNSC that he had already moved 250,000 soldiers and

their supplies, including blood plasma, to the area. He said he had already paid for the hardware, and as the French Ambassador shockingly observed, Meles wanted a quick return on his investment. Never mind that he was sending non Abyssinian Ethiopians to the front when he had already moved about half a million Tigreans away from the front, away from harm's way. Never mind also that the hardware was paid for in part with Oromia's coffee and in part from diverted relief commodities donated to Ethiopia to help the needy. Again everything Meles is doing is consistent with past practices: use Oromos and their riches to benefit Tigray. Surely it was not an original idea. It was borrowed from Ras Alula, more than a hundred years ago. Use Oromos to subjugate Eritrea for Tigray's benefit. Prime Minister Meles and his colleagues in the TPLF have learned their lessons well.

In the latest sorry episode less than a week ago, 130,000 poorly trained peasant soldiers, most of them Oromos, were sent to face well-entrenched Eritrean positions in the Mereb-Setit line. The objective was to occupy Eritrean territory at all cost. Eritreans saw the human wave coming, wave after wave. It made little sense to engage the wave. They let them pass, those that did not step on the landmines, the *fenjiregatch*, that is. The TPLF is probably the only military force in the world that uses human beings and pack animals as mine-sweepers. Conscripted Oromos became human mine-sweepers. Mules and donkeys from the area were "drafted' for the job.

In two days a few hamlets, *dembes*, fell into Ethiopians' hands. For their PR men every hamlet was transformed into a strategic place the Eritreans had lost. Ethiopia's central command bragged that it had annihilated eight divisions of Eritrean troops. Apparently 40,000 Eritreans perished in the two-day battle. If you are a consumer of TPLF statistics you notice something strange, something familiar about the figure. Last year in February the same PR people wrote a press release that gave the exact number of Eritreans, 40,000, killed in the "great total-victory" at Badme. Two great "total-victories" at the same place, two years in a row, and with the exact casualty figure? A bit strange.

Ethiopian Generals acted as if they won a special victory, unique in the annals of military strategy. Ethiopian embassies throughout the world spread the word about the huge victory in numerous press releases. Surely there was no cost-benefit calculation, whether the "victory" justified the cost in human lives. But then you are talking about *Gallas*[sic], as the TPLF official said. Apparently as far as the TPLF is concerned they don't count very much. What about the military hardware that had to be utilized because it was already paid for? Did Prime Minister Meles get a good return on his investment?

It's hard to say. All we know is that just in the last twenty four hours, one of the crown jewels of his air power, the SU-27, went down, hit by Eritrean anti-aircraft gun. Presumably its mercenary Russian pilot was killed, too. A

helicopter gunship also went down. Sixteen tanks turned into smoldering pieces of tangled steel. You wonder how much Oromia coffee was mortgaged to pay for all that hardware turned to ashes. Or the amount of relief commodities that was monetized and later diverted to pay the arms merchants for the hardware they sold to TPLF middlemen. So all in all we can't say that Prime Minister has made a good return on his investment. Of course he has written off the peasant soldiers. In the scheme of things they don't count, especially if they are Oromos or *Gallas* as the TPLF official dismissively called them. It's as if the Oromos were sent by God to die for TPLF's territorial ambition. One day the wrath of the Oromo people will erupt and will devour everything on its way. Watch out TPLF. Watch out.

We Eritreans do not expect anyone to die for us. Deep in our heart we know this: when it comes to defending our Eritrea, we know, it's just ourselves. No one will do it for us, nor do we expect it. In the end, it's just ourselves. And one more thing: when it's all said and done, and when the dust settles, victory is ours. It has always been that way. Some things never change.

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